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Ethiopia and Eritrea: Promoting Stability, Democracy and Human Rights

Thank you for the opportunity to explore with you concerns surrounding the current state of affairs in Ethiopia and in Eritrea as well as relations between the two countries. Before examining specific questions you may have on these two countries, I would like to provide some context for that discussion.

The immediate relevance of these two countries to U.S. interests is their location in the Horn of Africa and stability in the Horn is a priority for the United States government in the Global War on Terrorism. With Somalia, the world's only failed state at one end and the humanitarian crisis of Darfur at the other, and with famine outcomes evident in the worst hit areas, meeting this priority is no mean feat.

Avoiding another war between Ethiopia and Eritrea is key to ensuring stability in that troubled region. The United States played a major role in negotiating an end to the previous conflict between these two countries. The obligations of these former belligerents were outlined in the Algiers Agreement of December 2000. A core feature of the Algiers Agreement was the establishment of a border commission that would delineate, delimit and demarcate the Eritrea-Ethiopia border. Both sides determined that any decision of the Eritrea-Ethiopia Border Commission (EEBC) would be considered final and binding. The Commission pronounced its decision in April 2002. Unfortunately, the demarcation process has come to a standstill. The result has been a cold but increasingly tense peace between the countries with both maintaining large numbers of troops along the border. Over the past two years, we, along with the international community, have sought to find a common ground between the two governments without much success. The United States has supported United Nations Mission to Eritrea and Ethiopia (UNMEE) since its creation in 2000. In the July 2004-June 2005 period, UNMEE's budget \$216 million, with the U.S. paying 27 percent of that peacekeeping operation's costs through our assessed contributions to the United Nations. The border remains a fault line and both governments are rearming. While there is no rush to war, the prospects for renewed conflict are real and troubling. Despite our best efforts to separate our bilateral interests from the border, the dispute casts a pall over our relations with both governments.

I would characterize our relationship with Ethiopia as a complex one, reflecting a 100-year history of bilateral dialogue and exchange. As a major bilateral donor (approximately \$324 million in fiscal year 2004), we have been working with the Ethiopian government and civil society on the full gamut of development issues: ranging from health to food security to democracy. The breadth and scope of our development program in Ethiopia provides us with an appreciation of that country's political and socio-economic trajectory. Development is a non-linear process and, just as there are

areas of progress (such as HIV/AIDS prevention), there are areas of concern. The U.S. continues to discuss improved human rights and greater political and economic freedoms with Ethiopia.

The recent expulsion of three American democracy non-governmental organizations (International Republican Institute, National Democratic Institute, and IFES) is a concern. Their expulsion on the eve of parliamentary elections raises questions about that process. It also raises questions about the government's commitment to real meaningful democratic reforms and the development of truly democratic institutions. The government has claimed that these NGOs did not follow its procedures for registration. In our formal reclama, we have noted in detail the actions of these organizations to file the appropriate documents with various Ethiopian governmental authorities. These organizations did not enter into Ethiopia surreptitiously. They acted with the full knowledge and in full sight of the government. We have asked the government to allow these reputable organizations to return to Ethiopia to continue their important capacity-building work in advance of the election. I would also note however that we are supporting another American NGO to observe that election. The Carter Center along with European Union will field over 300 monitors to observe Ethiopia's May 15th election.

While our relationship with Eritrea extends less than 15 years to that country's founding in 1991, our bilateral relationship has been a challenging one. Over the past two years, we have had a frank dialogue with Eritrea's leadership about U.S. expectations in the areas of human rights, democracy, religious freedom, and economic liberalization, particularly as it pertains to our two detained Foreign Service National staff members and other Eritreans held without charge for political reasons. Eritrea's leaders know where the United States stands on these issues and in some areas our exchange on these issues can be quite energetic.

On the issue of religious freedom, there are two portraits of Eritrea. The first is of a society where two great religions, Islam and Christianity, have long peacefully interacted with mutual understanding. Members of the four registered religious traditions – Orthodox Christians, Muslims, Catholics and members of the Evangelical Church – are by and large allowed to practice their faith. However, the second portrait is a disturbing one: since May 2002, unapproved religious communities have been shut down and have been unable to practice their faith. Some of their members have been detained. Several groups have completed the government's requirements to be officially registered, but they have been rebuffed by the government. Groups such as the Jehovah's Witnesses, in particular, have been subject to severe restrictions. Because of the severe violations of religious freedom in Eritrea, in September last year the United States designated Eritrea a Country of Particular Concern. The United States continues to engage Eritrea to press for improvements in religious freedom. We continue to receive assurances from the government that it will register those churches that have properly completed the process to do so. But we need to see action by the government to fulfill these promises.

These and other issues facing us in Eritrea and Ethiopia are complex and not easily defined. Nor can they be resolved easily or simply. A looming famine in both Eritrea and Ethiopia complicates our efforts and makes the need to engage both governments even more compelling. I hope my brief comments have highlighted some of these complexities and I look forward to hearing your questions and observations.